

Venerable Tradition or Reprehensible Luxury? A Scandal about Processional Display in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco

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Summary: *A conflict within the Scuola Grande di San Rocco in 1540 concerning the display for the annual procession of Corpus Domini shows clearly that in those years of religious discussion and reformation many members of the scuole grandi were seized by the same wish for religious renewal as Alessandro Caravia, who was to publish *Il sogno di Caravia* with its well-known trenchant criticism of the scuole grandi in the following year. The then renowned lawyer Girolamo Gigante played a decisive role in this conflict.*

When Alessandro Caravia's *Il sogno di Caravia* was published in spring 1541, a long running scandal came full circle. In a series of scornful and satirical verses, Caravia blamed the most honourable Venetian scuole grandi for the waste of funds, for pomp and luxury, for the abuse of donations and for the moral offence of hypocrisy.¹ It was quite a challenge to the scuole's self-image and public profile. Having emerged from the thirteenth century religious flagellation movement, these prestigious confraternities for a long time formed an important part of the so-called 'myth of Venice,' i.e. the idea of a balanced community in which the different social ranks could live together in peace and harmony. The scuole grandi, governed by the intermediate rank of the *cittadini*, were considered as safeguards of the common good.

In his study on the Venetian municipality, the *De praestantia venetae politiae* (1473), the physician and humanist Giovanni Caldiera described the scuole as institutions in which the members were united in firm faith and brotherly love and lived like siblings and best friends. A governor and an experienced board guided them through life's vicissitudes. Any member who got into trouble or needed help would be led back to a healthy and honourable state by the support of the others. These confraternities were founded on the idea of charity. According to Caldiera, they overflowed with charity and brotherly love.²

¹ Caravia criticizes the scuole grandi in stanzas CLX to CXC of *Il sogno*, published in Venice in 1541 (ed. in Clementi, *Riforma religiosa e poesia popolare*, 191–199). Caravia himself was a member of the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista (Köster, *Künstler und ihre Brüder*, 16). For Alessandro Caravia see Clementi, *Riforma religiosa e poesia popolare*, 1–138 (with bibliography). On his criticism of the scuole grandi see Clementi, *Riforma religiosa e poesia popolare*, 57–64; Pullan, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice*, 117–131; Tafuri, *Venezia e il Rinascimento*, 125–129.

² "Alia et quam maxima et perfectissima necessitudo nostris offertur hominibus qu(1)a sunt conuentoes optimorum hominum qui una tamquam firmissima religione continentur in qua ita caritate ducuntur ut vel uti fratres et amicissimi uno regente et plurimis consultissime cooperantibus

In his extremely influential description of the Venetian state, *De magistrato et Republica Venetorum*, written in the 1520s and 1530s, Gaspare Contarini echoed Caldiera's optimistic views.³ Yet before Contarini's work was even published, Alessandro Caravia published his polemical verses which fundamentally shattered the image of social peace and charity within the *scuole grandi*. It is, therefore, not surprising that the *scuole grandi* tried — albeit in vain — to prevent the publication of Caravia's *Sogno*.⁴

This affair is well known and much discussed. What has remained unclear, however, is whether Caravia was expressing an isolated opinion or giving voice to a mainstream point of view.⁵ An incident that suggests that Caravia was not alone in his opinion shall be discussed in this paper. In fact, the controversy about the pomp of the *scuole grandi*, which became known to all Venice with the publication of *Il sogno dil Caravia*, had already been discussed within these confraternities themselves, as we can see from the records of an incident in one of them.

The incident occurred in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco — the scuola grande most fiercely attacked by Caravia — and concerns the processional displays which the *scuole grandi* usually contributed to the most important civic processions in Venice, the procession of *Corpus Domini* and the feast of San Marco. The procession of *Corpus Domini* was performed on the Piazza di San Marco from 1407.⁶ Throughout the Middle Ages, civic processions of this kind were regarded as representations not only of piety but also of social order and harmony. This was true both for those who participated and for those who watched them, both in Venice and in the rest of Europe alike.⁷

The Venetian processions in particular were famous for their display of affluence and luxury. In 1506, for example, the *Corpus Domini* procession took more than five hours as all the confraternities, the religious convents, and the guilds passed a platform where the *doge* and his government were seated

taliter regantur ut tutissimam in omni genere fortunae vitam agant, ut si ad inopiam redigantur, aliorum subventionem divitiarum et honorum fortunatissimi redduntur. Neque adversi aliquid contingere potest cui et non saluberrima praestentur suffragia. Hae Scolae omni caritatis genere superhabundant et in caritate fundate." (Caldiera, *De praestantia venetae politicae*, fol. 137r). I wish to thank Hildegard Wiegel for her help in making the unpublished text available to me.

³ Contarini, *Della Repubblica et magistrati di Venetia*, 104–105. Contarini's work was first published in Latin in 1543 in Paris. The Italian version was first published in Venice in 1544 by Girolamo Scotto (Gilbert, "The Date of the Composition of Contarini's and Giannotti's Books on Venice.")

⁴ Pullan, *Rich and Poor*, 118–119.

⁵ Patricia Fortini Brown, for example, regards *Il sogno* as a "single shrill voice of a private citizen"; Fortini Brown, "Honor and Necessity," 208.

⁶ Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 223–230.

⁷ Löther, *Prozessionen in spätmittelalterlichen Städten*.

together with the foreign ambassadors.⁸ Due to their prosperity, the *scuole grandi* traditionally contributed greatly to the splendour of the Venetian processions. They carried their important reliquaries and engaged professional singers and instrumentalists. A 1610 print by Giacomo Franco shows that they even carried portable stages on which children in fancy dress impersonated biblical figures or performed scenes and allegories (Fig. 1).⁹ The Scuola Grande di San Rocco was especially renowned for its representations. Even in years when other *scuole grandi* made only modest presentations or simply presented children disguised as angels, the Scuola Grande di San Rocco impressed spectators with newly-invented scenes and allegories.¹⁰

Alessandro Caravia intensely disapproved of such representations, as some verses of the *Sogno* show: “Building cuts into the revenues of the poor, and it’s not out of piety that they send their side-shows round the piazza, with some new contraption every year, spending their money on crazy things. We should love Christ and for love of him use these ducats, which are now ill-spent, to clothe the naked and feed the hungry.”¹¹

In precisely those years when Caravia was venting his trenchant criticism of processional luxury, customs were shifting in the north of Europe. Already in the 1520s, Martin Luther had fundamentally criticized the worship of the sacrament that was connected with the feast of Corpus Domini, and had mocked the processions for their hypocrisy. Regions and cities which adopted the Reformation soon abandoned the processions.¹²

The writings of Martin Luther were read in Venice soon after their publication. It seems, therefore, very likely that his ideas concerning the veneration of the sacrament, the feast of Corpus Domini and of processions as such were well-known, in spite of wide-spread prohibitions on studying, let alone owning his books.¹³ Although Caravia was certainly influenced by the new transalpine religious movement, he cannot simply be assigned to reformation circles. In his *Sogno*, he describes Luther critically as somebody who splits the church. He was most likely influenced by more moderate reform ideas

⁸ Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 224–225.

⁹ Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 225–230. For the importance of the musical contributions see Glixon, *Honoring God and The City*, 50–66 (with bibliography). For the portable tableaux see Muir, “Images of Power: Art and Pageantry in Renaissance Venice”; Vicentini, “The Venetian *soleri* from portable platforms to tableaux vivants”; Helas, *Lebende Bilder*, 44–45, 152–171, 234–241. For the print see Wolters, *Der Bilderschmuck des Dogenpalastes*, 49, 214, note 1.

¹⁰ Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 227; Urban, “La Scuola Grande di San Rocco nelle feste veneziane.”

¹¹ “Di poveri l’entrate si strappazza / in fabbricar, non gia per divotione / Baltresche anchora si manda per piazza / Mutando ohn’anno nuova inventione / Spendendo i lor danari in cosa pazza / A Christo vuolsi haver affettione / E per suo amor sti mal spesi ducati / Vestir gli nudi, e pascer gli affamati.” Caravia, *Sogno*, stanza CLXVII, 193; trans. from Pullan, *Rich and Poor*, 131.

¹² Löther, *Prozessionen*, 300–329 (with bibliography).

¹³ Seidel Menchi, “Le traduzioni italiane di Lutero nella prima metà del Cinquecento”; Martin, *Venice’s Hidden Enemies*, 25–48; Firpo, *Artisti, gioiellieri, eretici*, 56–70 (with bibliography).

circulating within the Catholic church, formulated by authors like Erasmus of Rotterdam and the Venetian patrician and leader of the Catholic reform movement, Gaspare Contarini.¹⁴

This tense religious situation formed the background for the events which took place in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco in connection with the Corpus Domini procession the year before Caravia's *Sogno* was published. When the feast of Corpus Domini drew near in 1540, the *guardian grande*, Girolamo Gigante, head of a newly-created executive board, summoned the board on the 22nd of April in order to discuss whether the confraternity should participate with portable stages as it had in recent years.¹⁵ The result of the discussion was unambiguous: only two of the twelve officials present were in favour of the traditional representations, whereas ten voted against them. The opponents disapproved because the representations in question caused more sensual pleasures than piety: "che de quelli più presto cauxar diletto al senso che cauxar divozion."¹⁶ Their arguments and even their words seem to anticipate Caravia's admonitions.

Who were those men who, with such convincing majority, so easily voted to abandon the old customs of the confraternity? The board in question had been elected only the preceding month. It consisted of a typical mixture of academics, merchants and traders from the rank of the *cittadini*. Brian Pullan in his fundamental study on the scuole grandi classified these as the common executive elite of the confraternities.¹⁷ Insofar as they are known to us, the occupations of the board members were mostly rooted in textile trade and commerce: They were cloth weavers, cloth merchants, or owners of wool-spinning mills; one merchant of almonds was also recorded. In addition to these entrepreneurs, there were three lawyers with doctoral degrees on

¹⁴ John Martin called Caravia's *Il sogno* a popular version of the teachings of Contarini (*Venice's Hidden Enemies*, 157). For the influence of the works of Erasmus on the Italian moderate reformers (also known as *spirituali*) see Silvana Seidel Menchi, "Alcuni atteggiamenti della cultura italiana di fronte a Erasmo"; on Caravia see Clementi, *Riforma religiosa*, 62–64. For Caravia's attitude towards Luther, *Riforma religiosa*, 51; Firpo, *Artisti*, 200–201.

¹⁵ "si se de andar ala ditta prozesione con la schola nostra secondo el modo di altri ani con quella dimostrazione di soleri soliti." ASVE, SGSR, II cons, registro 46, fol. 73v.

¹⁶ "Corpus Domini: El magnifico et exellentissimo miser Jerolamo Zigante dignissimo guardian nostro vedendo aproximarse la festa del Corpus Domini a congregato la sua bancha il questo zorno per consultar con quella et tterminar el modo de andar in prozesione. Al compagnar del sacrossimo sagramento, si se de andar ala ditta prozesione con la schola nostra secondo el modo di altri ani con quella dimostrazione di soleri soliti, sopra il che fu raxonato et alegato diverse raxone et rispeto sopra tal soleri eo maxime che de quelli piu presto cauxava diletto al senso che cauxar divozion dapoi detti tal raxon et altra et dando considerazion ale consuetudine di altri ani. El prefatto magnifico et exellentissimo nostro guardiano manda la parte fra li sotto scritti congregation di bancha che la ditta festa et prozesion se deba far con quella dimostrazion di soleri secondo el consueto et mando li bosoli e baloti atorno et avese la parte de si baloti numero 2, de no baloti numero 10: non fu presa." ASVE, SGSR, II cons, registro 46, fol. 73v.

¹⁷ Pullan, *Rich and Poor*, 99–131.

the board.¹⁸ One of these was the *guardian grande*, Girolamo Gigante, a man of considerable prominence. Born in Fossombrone in Umbria, he had studied at Perugia and Bologna before serving the Duke of Urbino and later Pope Clement VII as chancellor. At the time of his guardianship, he held a chair at the University of Padua and published some widely read and influential treatises on law. In the following year, he would be elected as an official state counsellor for canon law by the Council of the Ten.¹⁹

Gigante was a correspondent of Pietro Aretino and would later become a member of Federico Badoer's Accademia della Fama. His social standing and ambitions are discernible from an imposing bust and a portrait medal, both created by Danese Cattaneo (Fig. 2).²⁰ He was an active member of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco from 1536 onwards. Immediately before becoming *guardian grande* in 1540, he had represented the confraternity in a lawsuit against the convent of the Franciscan friars of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari.²¹ His special rank in the confraternity as a famous lawyer is clearly marked by the fact that he became a member of the advisory board of the *zonta* without following the normal *cursus* of functions within the board first. He served on this body twelve times between 1536 and 1559, but the only executive function he ever held was that of the *guardian grande* in 1540.²²

His vice-chairman, the *vicario*, took a different path. The textile trader Alvise Stella had already been *degano di tutt'anno* in 1509, but was not often a member of the board afterwards.²³ The third-ranked officer on the board was the *guardian da matin*, who took responsibility for the scuola's processions. The officer was at that same time one of the most active and ambitious confraternity members, the wealthy almond merchant Venturin di Varisco. After having been *guardian da matin* in 1540, he became *vicario* in 1543 and *guar-*

¹⁸ Most members of the *banca* had been elected in the beginning of the new year in March 1540. The *guardian grande* of the year was the lawyer Girolamo Gigante *dottor*, the *vicario* Alvise Stella *coltrier*, the *guardian da matin* Venturin di Varisco *mandoler*, the scrivani (elected in August 1539) Zuan Domenego di Gabriel *filador*. The two *degani di mezz'anno* (elected in August 1539) were Mattio di Alberto di Marin *sanser* and Anzolo fo Giacomo Zanchi *drapier*. The *degani di tutt'anno* were Jacopo di Andrea *marzer*, Nicolò Bergamini, Jacomo Fazin *dottor avvocato*, Ippolito fo Ieronimo Grandi, Giacomo Novello *dottor avvocato*, Zuan Maria Rasello *marzer* "al Pomo d'oro", Bartolomeo de Zuan Verdi *drapier*, Jacomo fo Ieronimo dalla Volta. Massimi, "Jacopo Tintoretto e i confratelli della Scuola Grande di San Rocco," 109–167.

¹⁹ Rossi, "Girolamo Gigante."

²⁰ Rossi, "Girolamo Gigante." For the portrait bust see de Angelis, "Danese Cattaneo's Portrait Bust of Girolamo Giganti."

²¹ Massimi, *Jacopo Tintoretto*, 74–83.

²² Massimi, *Jacopo Tintoretto*, 134. He is named among the members who died in 1562/63 (ASVE, SGSR, II cons, busta 79).

²³ He was again *degano di tutt'anno* in 1515 and belonged to the *zonta* in 1533 and in 1537 (Massimi, *Jacopo Tintoretto*, 157).

dian grande in 1547 and again in 1551. For his own burial chapel in San Lio he commissioned an altar pala by Titian showing Saint Jacob as a pilgrim.²⁴

There are no records of what opinions Girolamo Gigante, Alvise Stella, Venturin di Varisco or other members of the executive board held on the matter of processional display. We should recall that only two board members wanted to follow the old customs while all the others wanted change. The cost of the procession was paid by board members, but considering their strong economic background, it is unlikely that costs were a crucial factor determining the outcome of their discussion.²⁵ We can more likely assume that those who did not want the usual processional display were guided by religious convictions. The phrase that “the representations would cause more sensual pleasures than piety” does not imply a fundamental rejection of the veneration of the sacrament at the feast of Corpus Domini or a general rejection of processions like that expressed by Martin Luther. It seems instead that those members of the board who did not want the usual processional display, were seized by the same wish as Alessandro Caravia for religious renewal that followed the simplicity of the gospel.

The way the minutes were formulated suggests an open decision-making process. There is no hint that Girolamo Gigante, who had submitted the resolution to the board, preferred one result over the other. According to the record, the board was free to decide whether or not it was in favour of using portable stages for Corpus Domini as in the former years.

Yet was it really so easy to change a traditional custom of the confraternity, especially since it concerned a prominent public event? The subsequent progress of events shows that this was not the case. The problem was not resolved with the clear result of the vote. Moreover it was Girolamo Gigante himself who now spared no effort to have the confraternity take part in the procession of Corpus Domini with the usual display. After the decision of the board, there was still more than a month’s time until the Corpus Domini feast was due to be celebrated with a solemn procession on May 27th. Enough time to convoke a general chapter which could reverse the decision of the board. And this is what happened.

On Sunday the 9th of May, there was a meeting in the chapel with sixty-four members present. Girolamo Gigante now submitted a resolution very different to the one he had submitted a fortnight ago. He asked the general chapter for the permission to organize representations for the procession of Corpus Domini, even if the board had voted against them. According to Gigante, it was a time-honoured and praiseworthy custom of the former boards (“antiquo

²⁴ For his activities in the scuola see Massimi, *Jacopo Tintoretto*, 80–82, 161; Köster, *Künstler*, 104 n. 94; for his burial chapel see Massimi, “La memoria ritrovata,” 69–121.

²⁵ “El zorno dela sollelnita del Corpo de Christo questo anno 1521 venne del mexe de mazo. Et questo anno seguente vignera de zugno. Nui fessemo uno bellitissimo aparato de solerii et andanti a piedi signification del Testamento vecchio fatto tutto ale spexe de miser lo vardian et de i governanti dela bancha: per che cusi sempre se ha osservato.” (SGSR, *Ceremoniale del 1521*, fol. 17r).

et laudabile instituto”), carried out with prudence and praise, to honour the feast of Corpus Domini with some honourable representations (“qualche honesta rappresentazion”) which were paid for by the *guardian* and his board. At the present time, there were some board members who, for some reasons and particular feelings of their own (“per qualche lor causa et particular affeto”), were set against a continuation of the custom. He argued that it was neither reasonable for those opponents of the procession to be forced to share the expenses, nor appropriate that those who wished to follow the long-standing custom should be forbidden to do so. Gigante thus sought permission to proceed with processional displays as he deemed fitting, either at his own expense or at the expense of those who wanted to participate; neither the confraternity nor anybody who did not want to should be burdened with the costs.²⁶

What had happened? Had Girolamo Gigante been one of the two who had wanted the representations in the first place, without foreseeing that there would be such a strong opposition to the traditional custom? Or had he, of non-Venetian origin, been less eager to follow what was for him an unfamiliar and possibly unimportant ancient custom?

It is possible that he realized only after the meeting of the board that he could be at the centre of a scandal if the Scuola Grande di San Rocco under his guardianship failed to fulfil expectations with respect to this public event. It could have become a *scandalon* in the original sense of the word: a snare. A snare which would have gotten in the way of his professional and social ambitions and could have brought him down. History tells us that he was to become the Venetian consultant for church affairs in the following year. He then advised the Venetian government in its affairs with Pope Paul III. For the pope, processions were a sore point as a battlefield of the reformation movement. Later on, attitudes towards processions and particularly lack of reverence for them would often be used a circumstantial evidence for identifying

²⁶ “Corpus Domini. Parte messa in lo oltrapresente capitolo general de tor lizenzia de far la prozesion del Corpus Domini con li solari atento che per la bancha fu terminado in contrario essendo poi cresuti in capitolo che furono numero 64 qui soto anotati: Essendo stato antiquo et laudabile instituto de nostri maggiori che hanno de tempo in tempo governato, laudabilmente et con summa prudentia questa benedetta schuola del glorioso martire miser san rocho nella solenita del Corpus Domini honorare la procession con qualche honesta rappresentazion a spese del guardian e bancha, e perche se ritrovano talhora alcuni che per qualche lor causa et particular affeto repugnano che non si fazeno simel cose ne essendo conveniente, che chi non sente de partecipare de tal spesa sia agravata con la sua volunta, ne unque che per rispetto de quelli che non voleseno contribuir a tal spesa li altri che non vogliono deviar dal consueto instituto de sui maggiori che saviamente hano governato sin hora ditta nostra scolla, siamo impediti di poter far delle proprie borse quella spesa in cio gli parera conveniente. Pero landera parte che mete lo exellentissimo doctore miser Jerolamo Gigante nostro degnissimo guardian grandando chel sia in arbituo del guardian magior de detta nostra scola o solo o vero con quelli compagni della bancha che volesseno contribuire a tal spesa de honorare la ditta procession et scolla nostra con quelle cose gli aparano conveniente ale proprie spese senza dar carico ala ditta scolla fora del ordenario et non agravando alcun particular a contribuir a tal spesa con sua volonta.” (ASVE, SGSR, II cons, registro 46, fol. 74v).

heretics in Venice too.²⁷ Gigante would have been well advised not to be the one to introduce new customs in this field.

The reconstruction of Gigante's motivation for saving the processional representations must remain hypothetical. There was now, however, a real scandal in his confraternity. Despite the fact that neither the confraternity nor any individual member was burdened by the expense for the representations, Gigante got the sought-after permission with the bare majority of 35 to 29 votes.²⁸ The affair seems to have touched a matter of religious principle, and it divided the leading stratum of the confraternity into two parties. Nothing remained left of the unanimity and harmony praised by Caldiera decades before.

The immediate course of events is not known. We do not know if Girolamo Gigante had to pay on his own for the processional display, or if other members of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco shared some of the costs. We do not know what the representations looked like, and which figures and subjects were represented. And we do not know whether the spectators were pleased and impressed by them. What we do know is that this conflict or scandal remained an isolated event in the history of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco. In the second half of the sixteenth century, all scuole grandi spent larger and larger sums on processional displays in general, as Brian Pullan has shown.²⁹ The displays became even more abundant as the 1610 print by Giacomo Franco shows.

The conflict within the Scuola Grande di San Rocco permits us to take a brief but revealing glance at a phase of dispute and redefinition of old religious customs and traditions during a critical historical period. The controversy occurred just before the colloquy in the German city of Regensburg, where the Venetian religious reformer Cardinal Gasparo Contarini as papal legate made a final effort to reach a compromise with the Protestant movement.³⁰ The incident confirms that at that juncture the religious discussions in Venice were as prominent as in the German cities, and that the same social groups (merchants and skilled craftsmen) initiated and participated in them.³¹ Or as Caravia put it: "Ignorant men act as doctors. / They talk about Scripture constantly / in smithies, at the tailors', in barber shops — / theologizing beyond all measure."³² This instance shows that, in the year before the Colloquy of Regensburg failed and Paul III re-established the Inquisition, it was not only the

²⁷ Löther, *Prozessionen*, 300–329. For Venice see Martin, *Venice's Hidden Enemies*, 193–194.

²⁸ ASVE, SGSR, II cons, registro 46, fol. 74v.

²⁹ Pullan, *Rich and Poor*, 128–129.

³⁰ For the perception in Venice see Martin, *Venice's Hidden Enemies*, 41–42.

³¹ Martin, *Venice's Hidden Enemies*, 150–154.

³² "Molti ignoranti, che fanno i dottori / parlando ogn'hor de la sacra scrittura / per barberie, da favri, da sartori, / theologizzando fuor d'ogni misura" (Caravia, *Sogno*, strophe LXVIII, ed. Benini Clementi, *Riforma religiosa*, 166). Translation by John Martin (*Venice's Hidden Enemies*, 71).

jeweller Alessandro Caravia but also members of venerable lay institutions like the *scuole grandi* who partook in this religious restlessness.

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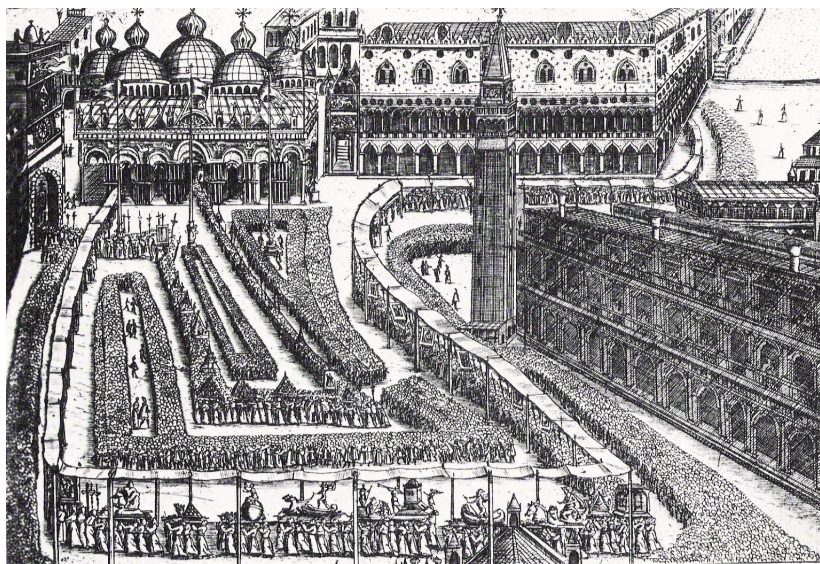


Fig. 1 Giacomo Franco, *Procession of Corpus Domini in 1610*. From: Wolters, *Der Bilderschmuck*, 49.



Fig. 2 Danese Cattaneo, Medal with the portrait of Girolamo Gigante on the obverse, ca. 1555, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Münzkabinett, inv. 13838 bB. From: Rossi, *Girolamo Gigante*, 245.